

God's Kingdom of Mercy  
Matthew 18:21-35  
Pentecost 16  
September 17, 2023

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 18:

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." (Matthew 18:23)

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. Kingdom of Patience or Kingdom of Mercy?

Peter gets the kingdom of heaven wrong. But this is a good thing for us, because we usually get it wrong, too, and today we get to hear Jesus' wonderful response.

Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter may feel he's being exceptionally generous with the offer, given the way the world works. Fool me once, your fault. Fool me twice, my fault. Mess with me a third time, and I'm blocking your phone calls and emails. That's how the world works; yet Peter generously makes the offer of forgiving the offender not just twice, but seven times. And perhaps this is how Peter gets the kingdom of heaven wrong: perhaps he thinks that the kingdom of heaven is like life in this world, but just a more lenient one where you get a few extra chances to do the right thing before the shoe falls.

Jesus is quick to correct Peter's line of thought, saying, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Then he tells what is often known as "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant." A servant owns a king a vast amount of money, more than an average Joe could ever repay. The king has the right to sell him and his family into slavery in order to recoup some of the money; but instead, he chooses to be merciful. He forgives the debt and sends the servant on his way. The servant, however, is quick to track down another who owes him a relative pittance; and when the man is unable to pay right away, the unmerciful servant throws his colleague into prison until the debt is paid. Rather than forgive a little since he has been forgiven so much, the unmerciful servant elects to punish the man severely.

There's some obvious Law in the parable: since God has forgiven you for so much, you ought to be able to forgive others for their comparatively little sins against you. As Jesus concludes the parable, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." That's enough Law to accuse us all, for it is easy for each of us to bear grudges and fail to forgive over even trivial things.

I'd like to push things a little bit further and deeper, though. Remember, Peter has got a wrong idea of how the kingdom of heaven works. If you take a look at the servants in the parable, they have a wrong idea of how it works, too.

When the servant is brought before the king, he's doomed. There's no way he's able to pay off the gigantic debt that he owes. But when he falls on his knees, what does he ask from the king? He doesn't ask for mercy, nor does he ask for forgiveness. He asks for patience: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." This is desperation talking. It's a frantic bid to postpone the judgment that is coming. He's saying, "Don't punish me now. Give me more time, and maybe I can figure out a way to get this paid off. Give me a chance to figure out how I'll work to get this taken care of." This is important: the servant isn't asking the king for mercy. He's asking for more time to save himself by his wits, his labor, his filing chapter 11, whatever. He's trying to deliver himself by his own works. This also means that he doubts the king will be merciful—he doesn't think the king will let him off the hook.

The king isn't dealing in patience: he's operating by mercy and forgiveness. He knows that there's no way the wretch before him can ever pay off ten thousand talents, and there's no use pretending or supporting the man's delusion. We're relieved that the king doesn't just cut the man off and say, "I'm selling you off now." But we should also be relieved that the king doesn't say, "All right, I'll let you go this time in a completely hopeless attempt to make up for your debt." That would be patience, but the man doesn't need patience. He needs mercy. He needs forgiveness. That's what the king does. He forgives the man. He says, "I'm forgiving the debt. I'm absorbing the cost. You don't owe me anything anymore. You're an upstanding citizen in my kingdom."

Now, as an upstanding citizen of the king, the servant should promote the policies of his king. He should represent his ruler well and reflect his agenda. But when confronted with another servant who owes him money, he doesn't forgive the lousy little debt. His own private kingdom doesn't work that way. The servant isn't merciful, and he throws the man in prison. The servant isn't even patient: it's "Pay up now, or you're going to jail until you do." When the king hears of it, he has the man thrown into jail, but note: he doesn't condemn the servant for being impatient, for not giving his colleague a fair shot. He condemns him for being unmerciful, for not forgiving the debt. This is a kingdom of mercy, not a kingdom of mere patience.

This is what Jesus is also teaching Peter: Jesus' kingdom is not a kingdom of mere patience, but a kingdom of mercy and forgiveness. Peter thinks that he's representing Jesus well by patiently forgiving more times before he cuts off the sinner, by saying, "I'll give you extra chances to make things right." If that is what Peter thinks, then he thinks that Jesus operates the same way—that Jesus gives sinners a certain number of absolutions before He cuts them off. But that isn't how Jesus' kingdom operates: His is a kingdom of unending mercy and grace. He doesn't say, "Your first thousand sins are on Me, but after that they count against you!" Instead, as He teaches Peter, He's on His way to the cross to die for the sins of the world—all the sins of all the world.

## 2. Citizens of a Merciful King

So what does this mean for you and me? By nature, we think a lot like Peter.

First off, we get sin wrong. We think that the sins of thought and word and deed that we commit, and the sins that people commit against us, are the big problem. They're a problem, sure: in fact, they're enough to condemn you for eternity. But we have a bigger problem than these actual sins, and that's

original sin. Briefly put, we're not sinful because we do these things. Rather, we do these things because we are sinful.

Does it matter? Absolutely. If we're sinful because we do sinful things, then we can become sinless by stopping these sins. In that case, we're going to act like Peter and the servant in the parable. We're going to say, "Lord, be patient with me. Give me some more time, and I'll clean up my act enough for You to love me." If that is true (a big and erroneous "if"), then the message of Christianity will be, "Get going and fix things up while God is still patient, because sooner or later He'll call you to account." And if that's the message of Christianity—that you fix yourself, do you still need Jesus to die for you? Not at all. It's about you making yourself better while you still have time. Is this a threat to Christianity today? Absolutely: why else would so many sermons today focus on how to make your life better, rather than on the forgiveness of sins?

Thus we need to repent of our errors and hold fast to our doctrine of sin. It is not that we're sinful because we do sinful things. Rather, we do sinful things because we are sinful. The sins that we commit are like symptoms of a virus—a problem, sure, but not the real problem. The problem is our original sin, the truth that we're conceived and born in sin, cut off from God and His righteousness. You can medicate and squelch the symptoms of a virus, but you're still sick. Likewise, you can cut back on your actual sins, but you're still sinful.

If we get sin wrong, though, the dominos will fall. We'll get forgiveness wrong, too. If we think that Christianity is all about making ourselves better, then we want God to grant us patience, not mercy. We'll think forgiveness is a loan to buy us time to improve, not a cancellation of the debt. This is a great offense to God: He didn't give His only Son to die to buy you time, to give you a few more shots against sin. He gave His Son to die to defeat sin and death, once for all.

Let's push a step further: how will this affect our treatment of others—of those who sin against us? If we think that forgiveness is a loan to buy us time, we'll treat others the same way. When we say, "I forgive you," it won't mean, "I don't hold this sin against you." It will mean, "I'm going to let it go this time, so you'd better do the work of shaping up." This was Peter's problem: "Lord, how many times do I have to be patient and give my brother another chance?" Jesus' answer was, "This isn't about patience. It's about mercy. Patience counts offenses, and patience has an end. Mercy forgives offenses, and mercy doesn't expire."

It's true enough, since we have been forgiven so much, that we should readily forgive others. That is Law from this text that ought to pierce each heart and move us quickly to repent. But don't miss the deeper problem: do we fail to forgive as we should because we misunderstand the Lord's forgiveness? Do we believe that He is truly merciful, or only patient? Do we see His forgiveness as a complete pardon, or only as probation and time to do better? If it is the latter, then repent: for you have accused the Lord of being far less merciful and gracious than He is.

Repent, and rejoice—because the Lord is merciful to you. When gathered here in the name of God, we do not sing, "Lord, have patience upon us," but "Lord have mercy upon us." We confess the joyful news that Jesus comes with grace—not to say, "I'm giving you another chance before the hammer falls," but "I will remember your sins no more."

The Lord's message in Baptism was not, "Here's a jump-start to get you going. And if you prove your worth and don't mess up too badly, I'll keep you around." Instead, He joined you to His death and resurrection. He forgave your sins and gave you life. He brought you into His family and said, "You are My child, and I will be patient with you; but know that you are Mine because I have already been merciful and gracious to you."

In Holy Absolution, the servant of the Word does not say, "The Lord is going to let it go this time, assuming that you clean up your act." Through the pastor, Jesus says to you, "I forgive you all of your sins." Thus He sets you free from sin to do good. Not because you're paying off a debt before His patience runs out—the debt is already paid! He sets you free to be merciful to others, as He has had mercy upon you.

Likewise, the Lord's Supper here is not to patch you up and buy you time on earth, but to give you forgiveness and eternal life. Here, the Lord gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. The debt is paid and you are free.

Is the Lord patient? Yes: thankfully, yes. The Bible reminds us that He patiently waits for people to repent. But more than His patience, we rejoice in His mercy. If He were only patient, He would say, "I'm going to give you another shot before I count your sins against you." His message to you is far better than that, for His message is one of mercy and grace, which says, "I remember your sins no more."

Soon in this service we will joyfully confess, "O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, and His mercy endures forever." And because His mercy endures forever, He says to you for Jesus' sake, "I forgive you for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.